Exploring Consumers’ Perceptions of Product Offerings’ Authenticity Within Contemporary Asian Markets

Martin Liu, Nottingham University Business School, China
Natalia Yannopoulou, Nottingham University Business School, U.K.
Richard Elliott, University of Bath, U.K.

The aim of this paper is to empirically explore consumers’ perceptions of authenticity in the context of market offerings. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted and conducted through in-depth interviews. Our findings revealed that consumers, within the Chinese marketplace, do not evaluate product offerings based on the binary relationship between perceived authenticity and inauthenticity. In contrast, they view authenticity evaluation as relational and hierarchical, rather than in terms of originality and uniqueness. As a result, two additional types of authenticity emerged, that of domesticated and mimic authenticity.

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Martin Liu, Nottingham University Business School, UK

China Natalia Yannopoulou, Nottingham University Business School, UK

Richard Elliott, University of Bath, UK

**Extended Abstract**

Throughout history consumers have demanded authenticity; from the interest in authentic religious relics in Europe between ninth to the eleventh centuries (Phillips, 1997) to the demand of authenticity in the modern day consumptions in a wide variety of market offerings (Alexander, 2009, Beverland, 2006, Handler and Gable, 1997).

Nevertheless, many postmodern writers have argued that technology advancement and global commercialism have undermined consumers’ ability to distinguish the difference between the real and the fake (Orvell, 1989), while some argue that consumers are no longer interested in telling the difference between the two and even seem to often prefer the easily accessible replica to the more inaccessible original. Frow (1997) argues that this has destabilized the fundamental concept of authenticity. Moreover, and in combination with the proposition that “authenticity is a fluid concept that can be negotiated” (Goulding, 2000, p. 837), further research within consumer research has been called for (Penaloza, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore empirically consumers’ perceptions of authenticity in the context of Chinese market offerings.

**Authentic and Inauthentic Product Offerings**

In consumer research the term authenticity has been used to describe something to be genuine, true, and not to be a copy or imitation (Stern, 1992; Peterson, 1997; Phillips, 1997). Grayson and Martinec (2004) propose a useful foundation for the assessment of authentic market offerings. Based on Peirce’s (1998) philosophy of signs, they supported the importance of indexical and iconic cues in the evaluation of authenticity. More specifically, Peirce’s work has linked certain types of cues (indexicality) with certain kinds of phenomenological experiences (iconicity). Thus, indexical authenticity refers to the original or real thing, while iconic authenticity refers to an authentic reproduction. As a result, “authenticity can be both a social construction and a source of evidence” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 310; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001).

Even though, we are still not comprehensive with regards to under what circumstances consumers’ assessments of authentic market offerings would emphasize iconicity or indexicality, a clear distinction between authentic and inauthentic product offerings has been identified in previous research (Peirce, 1998; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006).

With this study, we address Chinese consumers’ perceptions of authenticity. It has been noted that most existing studies approach authenticity as “a general preoccupation of modern Western culture” (Jacknis, 1990, p.9), and as a result examine it at large within Western contexts and hence neglect to address it as a phenomenon with considerable universal implications. We thus chose to explore the Chinese consumer market not only because of its considerable size, but mainly because of its consumers’ differences in beliefs and attitudes in relation to many aspects of consumer behaviour in general, and authenticity in particular. These differences due primarily to cultural factors have been more recently attributed to the noticeable increase of consumerism along with the considerable expansion of offshore manufacturing companies within this wider region (Liu and Wang, 2009, Staake et al., 2009, Vann, 2006). As a result, Chinese consumers are currently exposed to numerous and diverse levels of authentic product offerings at their everyday market place.
Method
In order to explore Chinese consumers’ perception of authenticity in the context of market offerings, in-depth interviewing has been selected as our data collection method. This is primarily because in depth interviews are concerned with how participants actively create meaning (Silverman, 2001). We conducted forty five in-depth interviews with Chinese male and female participants from mainly rural areas and within the age range of eighteen to forty years old. The participants for this study were recruited as following. Firstly, we employed the snowball sampling method, asking the interviewees to recommend close friends as respondents for the study. Secondly we created and posted flyers in several universities of Beijing asking for interviewees for a research project on brand perceptions and rewarding them with gift vouchers for their participation. The concepts emerged were analyzed using the interpretive thematic analysis technique (Spiggle 1994).

Findings
Our findings revealed that consumers, within the Chinese marketplace, do not evaluate product offerings based on the binary relationship between perceived authenticity and inauthenticity. In contrast, they view authenticity evaluation as relational and hierarchical, rather than in terms of originality and uniqueness. As a result the following two additional types of authenticity emerged:

Domesticated. The term “domesticated” refers to the products offered by local joint-ventures of foreign-run factories. Our respondents evaluate these products as less authentic, due to the identification of an inauthentic property within them. Consequently, they seem to have difficulties accepting that foreign branded products that are made in China or anywhere else than their country of origin are the “real thing”. According to our participants, “domesticated authenticity” is different from “true authenticity”, since it does not possess the same saliency.

Mimic. Our participants describe mimic products not as fakes but as less than perfect versions of the original ones. They recognise that they are inferior to the original ones because they fail to attain the same high standards. However, they support that they mimic the original ones in a relatively positive and sincere manner. More importantly, they clearly differentiate mimic products from counterfeits, as the latter are not simply seen as inferior versions of original products, but as inauthentic ones. Thus, mimic products are been considered by Chinese consumers as unavoidable and useful elements of today’s market economy.

In sum, this study provides insights into how consumers within heavily commercialised markets evaluate the authenticity of product offerings. Moreover, our findings present a tool to marketing practitioners, which will assist them in creating new consumer segmentations based on the above proposed classification of different levels of authentic product offerings, while preserving their brand equity and consumers’ long-term relations.

References
The Effects of Pre-visit Attributes on Active Consumption of Museums Experience
Babak Taheri, University of Strathclyde, UK
Karen Thompson, University of Strathclyde, UK

Extended Abstract

Like many services, the museum product is delivered with methods of simulating interest, also it is able to engage and provide a platform on which consumers could directly interact with the museum through their prior knowledge or static and visual facilities provided inside the museum (Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Goulding, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Prentice, 2001; Welsh, 2005). Meanwhile, within the marketing and sociology literature, researchers have developed a strong empirical case for a model of consumption which clearly identifies pre- and post-visit stages and attempts to establish how changes in variables in one stage of the model would affect other stages; for example how prior experience and knowledge influence consumption choices (Alderson, Junishbai and Heacock, 2007; Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu and Darbel, 2008; Dimaggio, 1987; Holt, 1998; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Prentice, 2003). This study is an attempt to take another step toward the above argument within the context of museum exhibits in Scotland.

Csikszentmihalyi (2008) and Driver, Brown and Peterson (1991) stress that enjoyment is the focal driver of optimal experience which is affected by knowledge, intrinsic motivation and level of participation. Consequently, the consumers’ knowledge is described as the level of experience and familiarity that an individual has with a product prior to conducting an external information search (Alba and Hutchinson, 2000; Dodd, Laverie, Wilcox and Duhan, 2005). According to Kerstetter and Cho (2004), prior knowledge can be classified as familiarity, expertise and past experience. The role of nostalgia (e.g. a yearning for the past) can be also added to the factors affecting consumption of cultural products which falls into two types: lived and learned (Goulding, 2001; Goulding and Domic, 2009; Sierra and McQuitty, 2007). Within the specific field of cultural consumption, Bourdieu’s (2007) notion of processes of consumption of cultures and lifestyle are widely cited, in relation to cultural capital as an influence on the context of popular and fine arts (Gans, 1974; Prior, 2002). Arguably, Bourdieu did not provide a clear statement about the nature of cultural capital, in particular the relationship between class and status, which has led to a variety of interpretations of his work (Alderson et al., 2007; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Savage, Gayo-Cal, Warde and Tampubolon 2005; Swartz, 1998). Therefore, three theoretical perspectives have emerged and are usefully summarised by Peterson (2005) and Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) namely homology, individualism and omnivore-univore argument. Later work has developed this argument to include additional categories: ‘paucivores’, whose members engage in an ‘intermediate’ level of cultural consumption across a range of activities and ‘inactives’ who have low probabilities of engaging in most cultural activities (Alderson et al., 2007). Moreover, the museum visit can be defined as a cognitive effort whose objective is educational and cultural or active visitors rather than passive and uncritical recipients of information and consumption of heritage (Bagnall, 2003; Guinotcheva and Passebois, 2009).

Finally, intrinsic motivation is another prominent pre-visit factor in cultural tourism consumption. Prentice (2004) applies Stebbins (2001) conceptualisation of the motivations for serious leisure to the study of cultural tourism motivation. He stresses that some cultural consumers are motivated by attaining stages of achievement, the acquisition of particular knowledge and the desire for long-term benefits which can be categorised into personal and social rewards.

Minor attention has been given to level of engagement during consumption and how cultural consumers engage with a cultural place (Chhabra, 2008; Coulter, Price and Feick, 2003; Goulding, 2000; Welsh, 2005). Welsh (2005) argues that the main mission of cultural places, particularly museums, is to evoke activities around three main domains: materiality (i.e. objective conditions of cultural place), representation (i.e. the scope of information that emerges from the cultural institution) and engagement (i.e. the multiple ways cultural consumers use to create images of their self-images). As museums recognise the greater complexity of their relationships with consumers, they have developed new mechanisms for enhancing the degree of engagement. Furthermore, Edmonds, Muller and Connell (2006) classify four core categories of interaction in art places namely static, dynamic-passive, dynamic-interactive and passive-interactive. It can be argued that these four categories can be seen in almost all museums and art galleries. Moreover, personal and social benefits in the consumption stages act as drivers, and effort may therefore be invested into the visit whereby the level of prior knowledge and expertise of the individual (i.e. cultural capital) are mobilised in order to achieve such rewards (Bourdieu, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Driver et al., 1991; Malone, 1981; Stebbins, 2007). In addition, according to service dominant logic, the motivation of consumers to actively participate in the production of a service (e.g. actively engage in co-creation of the cultural tourism experience), is dependent on consumers’ operant resources such as expertise, specialised cultural capital and knowledge (Arnould, Price and Malshe, 2006; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Thus, co-creation of value is desirable as it gives service facilitators the opportunity to better understand their potential (e.g. product and/or service) from consumers’ perspective (Etgar, 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2008).

With a particular focus on cultural tourism consumption, the paper examines the main influential factors of optimal experience namely cultural capital, familiarity and intrinsic motivation (i.e. rewards) and their relation with level of engagement from active and inactive consumers’ perspectives. The qualitative data analysis process for the study followed a step by step procedure used by Boyatzis’ Thematic Analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) by employing 23 semi-structured interviews in order to meet the mixed social class criteria. Informants were approached through theoretical purposive sampling techniques (Bryman, 2008). Interviewees were invited to discuss their visiting experience to art galleries and museums in three main stages of visit namely pre-visit, during-visit and post-visit in Glasgow or Edinburgh in the prior twelve months. Furthermore, photographs were used as a stimulating source for generating debates about level...